

Reading Group Guide

Spotlight on: *The Color Of Water*

Author: James McBride

Family: Born 1957; son of Andrew McBride (a minister) and Ruth McBride Jordan (a homemaker; born Rachel Shilsky); married; children: three. **Education:** Attended Oberlin Conservatory of Music; Columbia University, M.A., 1979. **Addresses:** Home: Bucks County, PA. **Agent:** (music) Cathy Elliott, 463 West 43rd St., Suite 2S, New York, NY 10036; (personal appearances and lectures) American Program Bureau, 36 Crafts Street, Newton, MA 02158. **E-mail:** jamesmcbride@jamesmcbride.com.

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Career:

Journalist; on staff of *Boston Globe*, *People*, and *Washington Post*, c. 1979-87; jazz saxophonist, composer, and producer, c. 1987-95; currently leader of a twelve-piece jazz R&B band; freelance writer and composer.

Awards:

Anisfield-Wolf Award for Literary Excellence, 1997, and Notable Book of the Year, American Library Association, both for *The Color of Water*; honorary doctorate, Whitman College. Awards for music include Stephen Sondheim Award, American Music Festival, 1993, Richard Rodgers Award, American Arts and Letters, 1996, and Richard Rodgers Horizons Award, ASCAP, 1996; *The Color of Water: A Black Man's Tribute to His White Mother* was chosen as the city of Philadelphia's second selection for the city's One Book program, 2004.

Writings:

The Color of Water: A Black Man's Tribute to His White Mother (memoir), Riverhead Books (New York, NY), 1996. *Miracle at St. Anna* (novel), Riverhead Books (New York, NY), 2002.

Also author of foreword, *Family: Moments of Intimacy, Laughter and Kinship*, Hodder Headline (London, England). Contributor to periodicals, including *Essence*, *Rolling Stone*, and *New York Times*. Author, with Ed Shockley, of the pop/jazz Broadway musical *Bobos*.

The Color of Water was also published in serial format in its entirety in the *New York Times*' Metro Section, 2004.

Media Adaptations:

ABC and Robert Greenwald Productions have purchased the rights to produce a TV movie based on *The Color of Water*.



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"SideLights"

For Mother's Day in 1981 journalist James C. McBride penned an essay about his mother for the *Boston Globe*. Readers, moved by the piece, wrote to McBride and encouraged him to write a book. More than a decade after McBride first approached his mother about writing her story, Ruth Jordan finally acquiesced. In 1996 *The Color of Water: A Black Man's Tribute to His White Mother* rolled off the presses. The title of the book reflects Jordan's answer to her son's childhood inquiry about the color of God's skin.

The Color of Water is told in chapters that alternate between the mother's recollections and her son's commentary. Jordan explains how she was born in Poland, the daughter of an Orthodox Jewish rabbi-turned-grocer who immigrated to the American South. Jordan says she fled the South to escape sexual abuse by her father, ending up in New York City. There she met and married minister Andrew McBride, helped him establish an all-black Baptist church, and gave birth to eight children. James was the youngest and never met his father, who died shortly before his birth. McBride described how Jordan remarried, had four more children, and raised him and his siblings in lower-income neighborhoods in Brooklyn and Queens. To protect her children from stigma, Ruth led her children to believe that she was a light-skinned black, and until late in his childhood, McBride did not question her. When McBride did ask his mother whether he was white or black, her response was: "You're a human being. Educate yourself or you'll be a nobody." The author explains that during his adolescence, he rebelled against his mother and stepfather's authority and was involved in petty crime. Yet he and his siblings overcame many obstacles, earning college degrees and self-respect. McBride gives much credit for the success of their family to his mother's Orthodox background combined with his father's Christianity.

Some reviewers have compared *The Color of Water* with *Divided to the Vein*, by Scott Minerbrook, another African-American journalist whose mother was white and father was black. Writing in *Booklist*, Alice Joyce called *The Color of Water* and *Divided to the Vein* "remarkably candid," adding "these memoirs reflect earnestly on issues of self stemming from the interracial marriages of their parents." In the *Chicago Tribune*, John Blades wrote: "Though McBride's disillusionment was not so severe as Minerbrook's, his memoir just as forcefully points out how 'divided to the vein' America remains, not just between black and white but also between black and black." He added: "Similar but very different, the two books are both eye- and mind-opening about the eternal convolutions and paradoxes of race in America, as seen from up-close and microcosmic perspectives."

As he delved into his past, McBride came to take pride in his Jewish heritage and became more empathetic to people of all kinds. "The lingering effects of slavery and color consciousness continue to push us in directions we shouldn't go," according to McBride, as reported by Blades. "What I'd like people to come away with is that we have a lot more in common than we think," he told Norman Oder in *Publishers Weekly*. Blades quoted McBride: "I think America is integrating itself kicking and screaming. But it's absolutely essential that we do. We can't survive any other way." According to a reviewer in *Publishers Weekly*: "This moving and unforgettable memoir needs to be read by people of all colors and faiths."

McBride's debut as a novelist came in 2002 with the publication of *Miracle at St. Anna*. Based on an actual incident from World War II, the book is about four soldiers from the segregated ninety-second Infantry Division (also known as the Buffalo Soldiers) who find themselves in an isolated part of Italy where a Nazi massacre has just occurred. While caring for a six-year-old boy who was the only survivor of the massacre, the four men join in the Resistance, working with partisans in a tiny Alpine town. Reviewers praised McBride's fresh dialogue—especially that of the corrupt Baptist minister-turned-soldier Bishop Cummings and the exasperated Lieutenant Aubrey Stamps—and his refusal to use stereotypes, even positive ones, when creating his Buffalo Soldiers. Clifford Thompson commented in *Black Issues Book Review*, "McBride weaves his third-person narrative seamlessly among the soldiers and Italian peasants, many of whom emerge as well-rounded characters—no mean feat for a novel that comes in at under 300 pages."



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Further Readings About The Author:

Periodicals:

American Prospect, September 10, 2001, E. J. Graff, review of *The Color of Water*, p. 42.
Black Issues Book Review, March-April, 2002, Clifford Thompson, review of *The Miracle at St. Anna*, pp. 29-30.
Book, January-February, 2002, Stephanie Foote, review of *Miracle at St. Anna*, p. 74.
Booklist, January 1, 1996, p. 782; April 1, 1997, review of *The Color of Water*, p. 1285; February 15, 2002, Margaret Flanagan, review of *Miracle at St. Anna*, p. 1006.
Bulletin with Newsweek, May 15, 2001, Ashley Hay, "Family: A Celebration of Humanity," p. 76.
Christian Century, November 19, 1997, George Mason, review of *The Color of Water*, p. 1063.
Christianity Today, February 3, 1997, review of *The Color of Water*, p. 61.
Civil Rights Journal, fall, 1998, Kevin R. Johnson, review of *The Color of Water*, p. 44.
Emerge, March, 1996, Lisa Page, review of *The Color of Water: A Black Man's Tribute to His White Mother*, pp. 59-60.
Entertainment Weekly, March 1, 2002, Bruce Fretts, "Miracle' Worker: *The Color of Water*' James McBride Makes an Impressive Foray into Fiction with a Multi-shaded WWII Tale," p. 72.
Houston Chronicle, March 17, 2002, Fritz Lanham, "McBride's Army," p. 18.
Hungry Mind Review, spring, 1998, review of *The Color of Water*, p. 53.
Jet, April 1, 1996, "Black Journalist Pays Tribute to White Mother in Novel *The Color of Water*," pp. 62-63.
Kirkus Reviews, December, 2001, review of *Miracle at St. Anna*.
Kliatt Young Adult Paperback Book Guide, March, 1997, review of *The Color of Water*, p. 27; September, 1998, review of *The Color of Water*, p. 6.
Library Journal, January, 1996, p. 110; April 15, 1996, Linda Bredengerd, review of the audio version of *The Color of Water*, p. 144; February 15, 1997, review of the audio version of *The Color of Water*, p. 115; February 15, 2002, Jennifer Baker, review of *Miracle at St. Anna*, p. 178.
Nation, April 22, 1996, Marina Budhos, review of *The Color of Water*, pp. 32-34.
New York Times Book Review, March 2, 1997, review of *The Color of Water*, p. 28; March 3, 2002, Charles Wilson, "An Accidental Truce," p. 16.
Observer (London, England), October 18, 1998, review of *The Color of Water*, p. 16.
People, April 1, 1996, Wayne Kalyn, review of *The Color of Water*, pp. 38-39; February 25, 2002, "Pages," p. 41.
Publishers Weekly, October 30, 1995, Norman Oder, "Black Men, White Relations," pp. 24-25; January 15, 1996, p. 454; February 5, 1996, review of the audio version of *The Color of Water*, pp. 37-38; March 17, 1997, Daisy Maryles, "Behind the Bestsellers," p. 17; August 14, 2000, "James McBride," p. 196; November 26, 2001, review of *The Miracle at St. Anna*, pp. 36-37.
Religious Studies Review, April, 1998, review of *The Color of Water*, p. 214.
St. Louis Post-Dispatch, February 13, 2002, Deborah Peterson, "Soldier's Story of WWII Uses Broad Brush in Painting Blacks," p. E1.
Times Educational Supplement, January 23, 1998, review of *The Color of Water*, p. 10.
Tribune (Chicago, IL) "Tempo" section, February 26, 1996, p. 1.
Tribune Books (Chicago, IL), February 16, 1997, review of *The Color of Water*, p. 8.
USA Today, January 29, 1996, p. D4.
Voice of Youth Advocates, December, 1997, review of *The Color of Water*, p. 305; April, 1998, review of *The Color of Water*, p. 42.
Wall Street Journal, February 9, 1996, pp. A10, A12.
Washington Post, January 14, 1996, p. 4.



Author: James McBride (4)

Online:

James McBride Web site, <http://www.jamesmcbride.com> (May 1, 2002).*

Source: Contemporary Authors Online, Thomson Gale, 2004.

Source Database: Contemporary Authors



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Spotlight on: The Color Of Water

Discussion Questions: From One Book, One Philadelphia:

Theme: Examining The Title

Why does Ruth tell James, "God is the color of water?" (51)

What is the effect of his accepting this?

Why does he say that his brother, Richie, did not accept this? (51)

Why is the phrase, the color of water, the title of this book?

Theme: Race

Why does Ruth say, "She's light-skinned?" (xvii)

Why is this in the paragraph before the book begins?

When does the color of her skin matter to Ruth?

How important to James is it that his mother, Ruth, is white?

Does James know why he hit the Black Panther's kid on the bus? (36)

Why was the "question of race...like the power of the moon?" (94)

Why did James think it odd that "race was something he [his stepfather] never talked about?" (125)

Why did racism smash James "across the face like a bottle..." (205)

Theme: Religion

Why does Ruth believe that marriage "is not about black and white. It's about God?" (233)

Why does Ruth tell James that being Jewish is a "real workout, which is maybe why I'm not a Jew now?" (2)

Why did Ruth's family declare her dead? Could this happen to you?

Why is Judaism dead for Ruth? ("truly gone from their world...") (284 - 285)

What strengths of Ruth that James loves and values do you think might have come from her Jewish background?

Why is Christianity so important to her?

Why does she believe it is the same God? Why is religion important to Ruth?

Why must James accept Jackie's advice to "Put yourself in God's hands" (161)



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Why does this book end with the quote from “Proverbs?” (291)

Theme: Identity

Why does James have to find “Ruthie” before he can find himself?

Why does James’s mother’s first name change from Ruchel to Rachel to Ruth?

Why has he structured the book with alternate, parallel chapters (see table of contents)?

Is James the “Jew Discovered?” (219)

Why is James frustrated by “a world that considers the color of your face an immediate political statement?” (262)

Why does James believe that his mother’s practices represented the best and the worst of the immigrant mentality?

When did he learn to put together music and writing? Why did he see these interests as conflicting?

Why wasn’t James’s experience as an outsider at school similar to Ruth’s?

What strategies did Ruth and James have in coping with life’s misfortunes?

After reading the book, what image would typify James’s existence to you?

Theme: Family/ Parenting Relationships.

Why is the list of Ruth’s children, their education and their present work included? (275)

Why is it important to tell us that James is the eighth of twelve children? (65)

Why does James state that “the image of her riding that bicycle typified her whole existence to me?” What are “mommy’s contradictions?” (29)

Why does James call “mommy...a flying compilation of competing interests and conflicts?” (260)

Was Ruth’s Mameh a good mother?

What did Ruth learn from her parents that made her a good mother?

How was the influence of Ruth’s father apparent in the way she raised her own children?

What did Ruth try to do differently from the way she was brought up?

How were her values different? Were any of her values similar?

How did James’s perceptions of his mother and stepfather change as he matured?

How did help from extended family members affect the lives of Ruth and James?



Book: Color Of Water

Theme: General.

What effect did James's successful quest to learn his mother's history have on both himself and his mother?

What role did New York City play in Ruth's and James's lives?

From Contemporary Authors, James C. McBride, 1957-